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ABSTRACT

Teacher roles in contemporary American schools should be more closely aligned to hermeneutics as the study of meaning (interpretation/understanding). A marriage between Platonic notions of interpretation and the quest for meaning with the interpretive theories of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Hans-Georg Gadamer is suggested. Schleiermacher argues that understanding cannot focus primarily on parts (words) without considering the effect the parts may have on the whole (ideas). In addition, von Humboldt contended that meaning is coproduced by the speaker and listener and is woven with cultural threads. He also believed that historians must unite separate historical components into a unified aggregate. For Dilthey, the task of hermeneutics, and interpreters, is to unite the past with the present through reconstruction. Gadamer explored the notion of how language forms the boundaries of understanding and interpretation. Teachers can apply hermeneutics in the classroom by changing their role from depositors of information to intellectual interpreters of information. Rather than being supplied with texts and goals and being required to apply "correct interpretations" of them, teachers would involve students in the construction of meaning around ideas which generate from within their experiences. (Contains 23 references.) (JDD)

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# CONSIDERING HERMENEUTICS AND EDUCATION: HERMES, TEACHERS, AND INTELLECTUALISM

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## Introduction

Hermeneutics considers questions of methodology, understanding, and interpretation and is usually defined one of two ways: as the study of the principles of explanation (methodological) or the study of meaning (interpretation/understanding). The two major points of this essay are (1) that teacher roles in contemporary American schools are more closely aligned with the methodological version of hermeneutics than they are to the interpretive/understanding version of hermeneutics and (2) the reverse should be true. By comprehending the two major distinctions within hermeneutic history and thought (method vs. interpretation/understanding), teachers should be better able to rupture their methodological roles in favor of interpretive ones. Such a change, however, is contingent upon an ethos of intellectualism for which this essay also argues. Specifically, what hermeneutic constructs inform education and schooling? How does hermeneutics play a part in defining the roles of teachers? On which version(s) of hermeneutics do schools currently operate and which version(s) might usurp prevailing assumptions?

Indeed, the Greeks and the moderns both offer examples of the two divergent notions of hermeneutics. This essay suggests a marriage between Platonic notions of interpretation

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and the quest for meaning with the similar interpretive notions of Schleiermacher, von Humbolt, Dilthey, and Gadamer.[1] Opposed to Aristotelian notions of grammatical logistics and Chladenius-like reduction of wholes to parts, the purpose is to argue that contemporary teachers currently operate from the restrictive and componential version of hermeneutics and should seek immediate change.

Ancient History

In distant history, the term was closely associated with Greek poetry and learning. Gallagher notes, "According to Plato...not only did poetry require interpretation, but poets themselves provided educational value only by being the 'interpreters (*hermēnes*) of the gods' (Ion, 534a)."[2] Plato's *Meno* furthers the interpretive position when, in it, Meno demonstrates the sophists' success of furthering memorization as education. The methods of memorizing speeches and poems, for Meno (via Gorgias), defined learning. Plato, however, and through the character Socrates, makes clear that true "learning cannot be reduced to memorization, even the memorization of correct answers. It essentially involves asking questions within an orientation that is guided by a process of [interpretation]."[3]

Similarly, Bruns uses Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War to make the

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[1]Rectifying the difference between Plato's Theory of Forms and Gadamer's reconceptualization of "positional hermeneutics" is not the point. Instead, the point is to suggest that Plato's use of "hermeneutics" is more closely aligned with what contemporary hermeneutics argues (interpretation/understanding) and that teachers in current American schools would benefit from this version of hermeneutics.

[2]Shaun Gallagher, Hermeneutics and Education (New York: SUNY Press, 1992), 1.

[3]Ibid., 193.

point that

> What Thucydides proposes...is the sort of [historical] account that can be put to the test not empirically, of course, but dialectically, that is, by being subject to another's discourse--subject to correction or to a second authority. Thus Thucydides imagines a self-possessed and critical audience, one that will keep its presence of mind and not get caught up in the heat of the narrative.[4]

Evident, then, is the Platonic expectation that truth is not something self-evidenced by customary transmissions of history and culture. Bruns suggests, in fact, that the principle at work here is logically simple and clear--"that truth telling means speaking under (or as if under) interrogation, or under subjection of another's thoughts."[5] Such a notion denotes the verson of hermeneutics which emphasizes interpretation and understanding. Anti-sophist, the point is against the pervasive emphasis in education on simple transmission.[6]

Aristotle, too, recognized the importance of hermeneutics, but, as seen in his writing *Peri Hermeneias*,[7] he considered the logic of assertions; particularly the organization of grammar by which the subject and predicate are used to reveal the character of things.[8] The formalism of grammatical rules, exemplified in Aristotle's writing, symbolize the structured

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[4]Gerald L. Bruns, Hermeneutics: Ancient and Modern (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 50-51.

[5]Ibid., 51.

[6]Recall that Sophists were "for-hire" instructors of rhetoric and oratory, whose function was similar to educational consultants of today...reductionist lists of what to do to be successful, but frequently without even understanding the substance of the oratory.

[7]See Aristotle, "*Catagories*" and "*De Interpretatione*," J.L. Ackrill trans., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963).

[8]Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present (New York: Continuum, 1989), 1.

(methodological) approach to hermeneutics, such that meaning, understanding, and the search for truth emerged out of the particulars.[9] This perpective is made clearer via Chladenius during the Enlightenment, but it nonetheless marks an early distinction between hermeneutics as interpretation and hermeneutics as method.

Flacius' Irony: An "Almost Was"

In 1546, at the Council of Trent, Protestant reformers furthered the principles of perspicuity and the self-sufficiency of scripture. Here the intent was to lay to rest any notion of individual interpretation. Importantly, in 1567, Matthius Flacius Illyricus published his views regarding the implications of the decree from the church regarding interpretation. In his *Clavis Scripturae Sacrae* Flacius challenges the notion that the church ought to impose external interpretations on scripture. His challenge suggests that it is the preparation of interpreters that should be scrutinized and reformed. As a result, Flacius argues for the reformation of the **preparation** of interpreters and, therefore, an end to "incorrect" external interpretations by the church.

Perhaps without knowing it, Flacius' commentary opens wide the discussion of interpretation. Whose interpretation? Based on what perspectives? How does mortal bias effect interpretation? Interestingly, Flacius' work did not, at the time, open floodgates of

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[9]It is important not to confuse hermeneutics with hermeticism. Hermeticism is traceable to Hermes Trismegistus, the Egyptian sage-like demi-god figure to whom certain ancient Greek and Latin writings on magic, religion, and philosophy are ascribed. For further clarification regarding the distinction between hermeneutics and Hermes and hermeticism and Hermes Trismegistus, see Garth Fowden, The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) and Walter Scott, ed., Hermetica, Volume I, (London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1968).

critique. Instead, his work ironically served to impose new rules for external interpretation. From this, hermeneutics gains its momentum as a methodological construct. **How to** interpret becomes a central issue. For Flacius, this resulted in more of the external imposition of rules which he originally challenged.

While the parallel is strained (given the clear authority of the church over scripture in a theocracy versus govermental authority "over" schools in a democracy), it can be made. Instead of calling for better prepared interpreters of scripture, the call is for better teachers. Instead of indicting the church hierarchy, an indictment can be made of national testing and standards committees, Goals 2000, and federal leadership which excludes scholars in the area of education. For contemporary teachers, however, the centrality of method, as exemplified by Flacius, is still the major emphasis in teacher education and, it is argued, lies at the heart of the larger problem of teacher intellectualism with which this essay ultimately deals.

"Modern" Considerations

With some exception, as with Plato and Aristotle noted earlier, discourse dealing with hermeneutics did not develop into a more specialized study until around the Enlightenment. Wolff, Chladenius, Schleiermacher, von Humbolt, and Dilthey deserve texts unto themselves. For the purpose of this essay, however, only a brief introduction to their thoughts is necessary to bridge an understanding of the importance of hermeneutics to the roles of teachers in contemporary schools. Importantly, Chladenius and Wolff are more closely aligned in their methodological conception of hermeneutics while Schleiermacher, et al., symbolizes the beginning of the interpretivist epoch.

Wolff divided all writings into two major categories: historical or dogmatic.[10] In order to judge the writings, certain qualities must be present. Historical writings should be judged according to their "completeness," "truthfulness," and "sincerity" because once history passes, it is impossible to have access to historical truth.[11] Dogmatic writing, on the other hand, must be judged on the truth of the content, the strength of the argument, and the knowledge of the subject presented in the text. It is here that the notion of authorial intention emerges. Wolff uses authorial intention, as does Chladenius, as a justification for the detachment of the written text from the author's personal biases. Authorial intention, then, has nothing to do with the psychology of the author. It, instead, deals with impartial and objective criteria, according to Wolff and Chladenius. Arguably, the notions of impartial and objective criteria here are similar to Flacius' argument calling for the proper preparation of interpreters of religious writings. In other words, as a methodology, hermeneutics allows the detachment of the interpreter for the purpose of getting closer to truth.

Indeed, when Chladenius writes about interpretations, he utilizes Aristotelian terminology, particularly the term art, and therefore reflects the extent to which his work in hermeneutics is based in Aristotle's rhetorical legacy.[12] Since "'to be understood' was in the nature of an utterance [Aristotelian], Chladenius defined hermeneutics as the art of attaining the perfect or complete understanding of utterances (*vollstandiges Verstehen*)--

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[10]See Christian Wolff, Vernunftige Gedanken, in Gesammelte Werke, I. Abteilung, vol. 1, chpts. 10, 11, and 12.

[11]Ibid., pp. 219-226.

[12]See Johann Martin Chladenius, Introduction to the Correct Interpretation of Reasonable Discourses and Books, 1742.

whether they be speeches (*Reden*) or writings (*Schriften*)."[13] Interpretation here, however, should not be confused with contemporary usage of the same term. Interpretation for Chladenius had to do only with specific words and phrases. Not until the Romantics did entire text interpretation become more profound. Chladenius, his students, and his contemporaries were primarily concerned with the science of detached understanding of the true meaning of the terms used in specific kinds of writing. Strange as it may sound to contemporary audiences, hermeneutics for Chladenius involved analyzing the parts and not the whole. Current teachers, unfortunately, compare favorably in this light. Either due to certification requirements or their own hegemonic demands for practical applications, teachers seek the parts (skills, procedures, plans, models, etc.) rather than investigate the whole (power/priviledge relationships, sociological aspects of teaching, epistemological considerations, role identity/identification/construction, etc.).

Schleiermacher, on the other hand, more closely approximates a beginning point for a different hermeneutic understanding. It is Schleiermacher, after all, who articulates the view that language and thought are necessary partners for scholarship. He suggests that language does not exist alone and apart from mental scrutiny. "Long must [people] search amid the profusion of language before a term can be found, above all suspicion, to which [their] inmost thought can be entrusted; once found the unspiritual immediately catch up to the phrase, give it some strange twist, so that a person hearing it thereafter must needs [*sic*]

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[13]Mueller-Vollmer, 5.

doubt as to its original connections."[14] A scholar writing a text, therefore, is unable to use "objective" terms to signify scholastic theories because the terms themselves are only understood in relation to a larger whole. Modification and modulation happen in the process--and Schleiermacher notes these processes as necessary.

Interpretation now takes on a wider scope. Schleiermacher argues that understanding is contingent. It does not exist simply by following methodological dictates regarding hermeneutic investigation. The process of understanding cannot focus primarily on the parts (words) without considering the effect the parts may have on the whole (ideas). This does not suggest that legalistic-like scrutiny of individual terms is not important or necessary. Indeed, individual term understanding is important, but particularly as such understanding is related to larger ideas.

Two further developments in this abridged history of hermeneutics involve von Humbolt; first, his assertion that conventional understandings of the role of language were incorrect in his work involving history and interpretation. Regarding language, what von Humbolt suggests is that language is not a neutral avenue through which intentions are ever-present. In other words, language is not a static means of transmitting information and understanding. Instead, meaning is co-produced by the speaker and listener. Woven as an integral part of this process is a cultural thread. While rudimentary patterns of linguistic understanding pervade all cultures, and therefore might result in a form of objectivity, people can only understand one another if they test their words against the words of others.

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[14]Friedrich Schleiermacher, Soliloquies trans., Friess (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1957), 64-65.

For teachers, however, testing the meaning of words and co-producing meaning with students runs against contemporary policy expectations (test score norms, coverage of material with set time limits, predetermined goals and objectives, etc.). It also presumes that the environment of school is primarily one for searching out and constructing meaning rather than emphasizing transmission of essentialist mandates.

The second major contribution of von Humbolt concerns historical understanding. He argues that historians must do more than glance at happenings and note these happenings dutifully. Instead, historians must situate themselves in such a way as to unite separate historical components into a unified aggregate. Regarding hermeneutics: "if...historian[s] must interpret individual phenomena in the light of an overriding [unified aggregate] which itself is not directly observable, [historians] must supply the idea of this [aggregate themselves]."[15] Another way of saying the same thing is that parts are most fully understood in relation to a whole. Again, the role of the historian, like the role of humans in general, depends to a large degree on interpretation. Interpreting phonemes, words, phrases, etc., is an inherently necessary process for knowledge to emerge. Comprehending the world depends on interpreting ideas, which are conveyed by linguistic means, and investigating various illustrations of their meaning.

For teachers, this suggests a liberal education is vital in their preparation as opposed to narrow, certification-directed instrumentalism. Yet, liberal studies of the humanities, arts, and sciences neither fits the seeming utilitarian orientation of prospective teachers nor the equally (if not more pervasive) utilitarian interests of teacher education institutions. Such a

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[15]Mueller-Vollmer, 16.

point should not emphasize the specifics, rather it should emphasize the ethos surrounding teachers, teaching, and teacher education. For von Hombolt (if the analogy can be made), teachers must be intellectually able to unite separate components into a "unified aggregrate." This suggests a form of intellectualism not readily evidenced (nor yet expected) in the realm of teacher education.[16]

Modern Hermeneutics

Modern hermeneutics, then, is more closely aligned to Schleiermacher and von Humbolt than any previous thinkers. An abridged lineage might add Dilthey, Husserl, Heideggar, Gadamer, Habermas, and Ricoeur and all should be explored for their contributions to hermeneutics.[17] For the purposes of this essay, however, and for the sake of brevity, only a select few ideas of these latter philosophers are necessary to cultivate the point of this essay.

For Dilthey, the task of hermeneutics, and interpreters, is to unite the past with the present through reconstruction.[18] What he means by this is best exemplified through the

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[16]The argument is not for a "Great Books" curriculum, but for a humanities perspective not subsumed under technocratic ends and means.

[17]See, for example: Wilhelm Dilthey, "The Rise of Hermeneutics," trans., Frederick Jameson, New Literary History, 3, 1972; Edmund Husserl, Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, trans., F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nihoff, 1983); Martin Heideggar, "Overcoming Metaphysics," trans., J. Stambaugh in The End of Philosophy (New York: Harper and Row, 1973); Hans-Georg Gadamer, Reason in the Age of Science, trans., Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981); Jurgen Habermas, Theory and Practice (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973); and Paul Ricoeur, The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974).

[18]See Dilthey, op. cit.

following illustration: historians and/or teachers who are concerned with, say, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, have certain roles of reconstruction which they must achieve for understanding to exist. Specifically, Pestalozzi's life and wanderings around Switzerland are intimately connected to the philosophy of education he developed at his various schools.[19] The interpreter's task is to define and explain the symbols used in the accounts of Pestalozzi (i.e., antiquated terminology, words whose meanings may have changed but which have specific meanings to Pestalozzi's life--*Anschauung* or "view" taken to mean "sense impression" for naturalism-oriented educators, for example).

Next, it is important, according to Dilthey, that the interpreter detect underlying experiences of necessity and need. For Pestalozzi, an interpreter might detect a connection between Pestalozzi's compassion for children and his rearing in a fatherless home. Furthermore, Dilthey argues, the interpreter must reconstruct the context of forgotten meanings characterizing, in Pestalozzi's case, eighteenth and nineteenth century situations like teaching during Napoleonic wars. While Dilthey and others consider historians interpreters, a similar recognition of teachers as interpreters is easy to make. Of course historians can be teachers, but the point here is that the philosophic realm of hermeneutics is generally referenced as highly intellectual and involving major theoretical investigations not typically associated with classroom teachers. Interpretation and teaching, however, are logical outcomes and **should** be linked to the similar intellectual rigor associated with historians.

Finally, to complete the greatly abridged history of hermeneutic thought, Heideggar

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[19]See Hermann Krusi, Pestalozzi: His Life, Work, and Influence (New York: American Book Company, 1875).

and Gadamer augment Dilthey's ideas and drive hermeneutic thought into the realm of existence.[20] Accordingly, hermeneutics is intertwined with existence and is intrinsic to it. Gadamer, in particular, links language and understanding in a revised way. For Gadamer, language forms the boundaries of understanding and interpretation. Ancient texts, for example, may have meaning, but are situated in the "dilemma of selfhood." That is, Gadamer argues, even the philosophical attempts to locate and describe the essential core of selfhood come up with an ahistorical meta-language of the self. In other words, Hegel and Husserl, for example, both in some way talk about a transcendental "I," yet there are no absolute or univocal truths about the different "I"s that can be derived from their texts. Truths, instead, are situated within their respective contexts. Note again how interpretation and understanding continue to appear as necessary conditions for knowledge. Important now is the link between the history and theory of hermeneutics and the role of hermeneutics in the lives of contemporary school teachers.

Interpretation and Teaching: Teacher as Hermes

Given the broad, albeit shallow, history of hermeneutics defined above, what links are seen between hermeneutic history and current schools? How might teachers benefit from exploring hermeneutics? While there may be a propensity to misinterpret the term hermeneutics as a vague paradigm for relativist discourse, this essay argues that the history of hermeneutics offers teachers in contemporary schools a direct link to allegorical

[20]See Heidegger and Gadamer, op. cit.

understanding. The following metaphor, then, deserves exploration: Teacher as Hermes.

Historically significant, at the very least etymologically, Hermes exists as an example, though not a prototype, for teachers and prospective teachers to explore in order to best develop their own roles in public institutions. There are two major reasons which are linked as a part of this assertion: 1. Hermes' role and 2. Pluralism.

Hermes, as the Greek messenger god, was responsible for interpreting what he and the other Greek gods said in order for mortals to understand their missives.[21] Socrates points out that words are Hermes' invention and that this necessarily brings with it interpretation. Words are not fixed or static or staid. They are of a context, which also happen to change. Krajewski puts it this way:

> It is appropriate that Hermes is associated with hermeneutics, because he is a messenger, someone whose existence and purpose depend on dialogue. He takes messages from goddess to god, or from the goddesses and gods to mortals; he is the embodiment and movement of discourse...That dialogue is primary to understanding shows that understanding is a socal, not private act, nor a mental operation.[22]

Given the interpretive slant of hermeneutics and given the situatedness of modern hermeneuticists (Hermes today would not be the same Hermes of antiquity, but would be a close approximation), a modern Hermes would not be in the hierarchical scheme of ancient mythology, but would be in a democratic plurality. This means that members of society are dependent upon dialogue and interpretation for understanding to result. Teachers-as-Hermes'

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[21]Hermes was also known as a thief and magician in Ancient Greece, but of his many roles, this essay suggests his most important was as messenger/interpreter. For an interesting treatment of the symbolism of Hermes as trickster, see Donald F. Nelson, Portrait of the Artist as Hermes (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1971).

[22]Bruce Krajewski, Traveling with Hermes: Hermeneutics and Rhetoric (Amherst: University of Amherst Press, 1992), 8.

if the metaphor holds, are positioned in schools as democratic public spheres where the environment, students, parents, and other teachers (along with leaders of districts and schools) become part of the interpretive reality.[23] As it currently stands, however, schools are not democratic public spheres into which teachers-as-Hermes' (transformative intellectuals) are readily attracted. Teachers-as-Hermes', after all, are not dependent upon static forms of language which structure and prescribe methods (the current situation is most American schools).

The point, of course, is to contrast the teacher-as-Hermes metaphor with the generalized reality currently discernible in many American schools. As Freire notes, teachers typically act as depositors of information.[24] Their roles center around ideas like "transmitting" and "instilling."[25] As teacher guides for textbooks illustrate, the possibilities for interpretation are thwarted by concerns about *technē*. This is particularly relevant when school visions embrace teacher-guide approaches.

Dilemmas may result from arguing for teachers as intellectuals, however. Does "teacher as intellectual" sanction personal ideas in the classroom? How much "subjectivity" is allowed? Are teachers responsible enough in this regard? Hermes, after all, as the

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[23]See Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed (New York: Continuum, 1974).

[24]Ibid.

[25]See, for example, Robert M. Hutchins, The Conflict of Education (New York: Harper & Row, 1953), Clifton Fadiman, "The Case for Basic Education," in James Koerner, ed., The Case for Basic Education (Washington, D.C.: Council for Basic Education, 1983), Richard Rodriguez, "What Is an American Education?" Education Week, vol. 7, no. 1 (September 9, 1987), and Edward A. Wynne, "The Great Tradition in Education: Transmitting Moral Values," Educational Leadership, vol. 43, no. 4 (December 1985/January 1986).

inventor of language, not only had the power to reveal, but also to conceal and withhold. The ultimate cynic might even ask if teachers, as a general lot, are even capable of **being** intellectuals. But these questions are important not for the purpose of precluding teachers as intellectuals, but in defining teachers as intellectuals. In other words, the very questions which might prevent a process of inquiry resulting in intellectualism are inherent to generating, defining, and continuing a state of intellectualism. As cyclical evaluations themselves, the previously noted questions serve two important purposes: (1) appraise teacher intellectualism and (2) to, at the same time as (1), define and redefine intellectualism.

Care should be taken, however, not to allow Flacius' paradox. Recall that Flacius argued against the church's external interpretations of scripture. His questions were less about the role of interpretation, as the term is currently accepted, and more with the process of schooling people in ways and methods of interpreting scripture. Perhaps this dilemma is relevant in contemporary American schools.

Instead of locating intellectual interpretation with individuals and (concurrently) clusters of individuals, and using this focus to generate ideas and possibilities within schools, intellectual interpretation has been subsumed under external dictates like state learning objectives, national goals, and competitive market strategies. The result, similar to Flacius' time, is the production of methodological technicians whose concerns are primarily focused on external procedures transmitted to them at the expense of independent interpretation and intellectualism.

Teachers as Hermes' ruptures this dilemma as it locates teachers in positions of power which offer the most hope for recognizing pluralism in their classrooms and beyond. As

reflections of a larger democracy, interpretive teacher and student interactions focus mental energies on process rather than product. Herein is the distinction between antiquated and modern versions of hermeneutics. Process is not procedure here. Rather than being supplied with specifics (texts, outcomes, goals, etc.) and required to apply "correct interpretations" of those specifics, teachers' as Hermes' involve students in the construction of meaning around ideas which generate from within their experiences (including teacher experiences and interests).[26] Interpretive positions result which are best able to inform (and sustain) pluralist democracies and further forms of intellectualism presently lacking in schools and society.

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[26]See Gallagher, 277-317.

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